



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

11 | 2015

**Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture /
Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British
Literature and Culture**

Promoting Gender Equity on the American Stage (1): *League of Professional Theatre Women*

Interview with Maxine Kern (co-president)

Emeline Jouve



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7588>
DOI: 10.4000/miranda.7588
ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Emeline Jouve, "Promoting Gender Equity on the American Stage (1): *League of Professional Theatre Women*", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 21 July 2015, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7588> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.7588>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



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League of Professional Theatre Women Website

<http://theatrewomen.org/>

figure 1



Biographies of the co-presidents of the League of Professional Theatre Women

- 1 Pamela Hunt has been a professional theater director/choreographer for over 30 years. She has specialized in both plays and musicals in over 100 productions. In NYC she was nominated for a Drama Desk Award for outstanding direction of a musical for “The Musical of Musicals” and also received the Kevin Kline Award. Her production of *Carnival!* received the Outer Critics Circle award for Best Revival. She has directed numerous productions at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Asolo Theatre, Cincinnati Playhouse, Cleveland Playhouse, Coconut Grove Theatre, GEVA Theatre, Laguna Playhouse, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Papermill Playhouse and The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. Prestigious stock productions include *The*

MUNY St. Louis, TUTS Atlanta, Pittsburgh CLO, Ogunquit and Westport Playhouses, plus 20 years at the famed Cape Playhouse in MA. She is on the Advisory Board for the Duke Ellington Center for the Arts and is Co-President of the *League of Professional Theatre Women*.

- 2 Maxine Kern is a dramaturg and playwright in NYC for over 20 years. Her recent dramaturgy includes *Dying to Love Picasso* by Terry D'Olfonso, *Final Analysis* by Otho Eskins, *As it Is in Heaven* by Arlene Hutton, *Savannah Black and Blue* by Raymond Jones, *The Book of Lambert* by Leslie Lee and *For the Time Being* by W.H. Auden. She is presently working on plays about the social activist, Emma Goldman, and the Canadian national artist, Emily Carr. She has been part of the artistic staff of The McCarter Theater, The New York Shakespeare Public Theater, New Georges, The George St Playhouse, Company One Theater and New Dramatists, Inc. She has been a lecturer at SUNY Stony Brook, and Columbia University for The Narrative Medicine Program. She is Co-President of the *League of Professional Theatre Women* and a member of *Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas*.

The Interview

Emeline Jouve: What is the League of Professional Theatre Women?

Maxine Kern for the League of Professional Theatre Women: We are a group of almost 500 women members and international affiliates who have achieved a level of excellence and professionalism in Theatre seeking gender affiliation and equity in the theatre world.

Maxine Kern, co-President of the League of Professional Theatre Women (LPTW): We are a group of almost 500 women national and international members and international affiliates who having achieved a level of excellence and professionalism in Theatre seek gender affiliation and equity in the theatre world.

EJ: How would you define "professional theatre"?

LPTW: We require that our members have worked with a theatre project or company for at least 3 years for an associate membership, and at least 5 years for a full membership. Theatres that fall into the category of Broadway, off Broadway, Off Off Broadway, Regional Theater, and other theatres that can employ theater artists are considered a professional theatre. Our members have submitted resumes that name these theatre projects, and have been recommended in their discipline by current members of our organization.

EJ: Under which circumstances was LPTW created?

LPTW: A group of theater women who were producing plays and in some cases acting in them, found that they were the only women other than actresses, in the rehearsal, board and business room. They connected with each other over 30 years ago and created a League of Professional Theatre Women to support and gain recognition for their work and the work of other professional theatre women.

EJ: What are the missions of the LPTW?

LPTW: The League seeks to recognize and expand the visibility of women for the excellent theatre work that they do.

EJ: What are the programs that the LPTW has set to achieve its aims?

LPTW: The League gives awards to remarkable theatre women. THE BIG MINGLE GALA AWARDS includes categories of, lifetime achievement, diversity, best leadership of an emerging, inspiring and innovative theater company or project, best theatre designers, best social and or political or social activists for change through theatre. We also award THE GILDER/COIGNEY INTERNATIONAL AWARD: every three years we present an international woman with an award for contributing to theatre excellence and to the betterment of the lives of women in her community through theatre. All awards are presented in gala, public award ceremonies.

We co-sponsor ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS of women in theater of prominence and achievement, in conjunction with the New York Public Library Performing Arts Library.

These interviews are open and free to the public and saved in video archives.

WOMEN STAGE THE WORLD is among our advocacy projects. This is a yearly parade on Broadway which announces that and supports the presence of women playwrights, directors, producers, designers, stage managers, as well as actresses on Broadway.

As such this parade highlights most particularly, the need for a presence of work by women on the Broadway stage.

ON HER SHOULDERS is a program in which The League gives educational support of programs producing readings of plays by women playwrights of the past whose careers and works have been previously erased from the literary canon.

THE LEGACY PROJECT is a program in which the League gives educational support for solo performances by women who portray actresses and women movers and shakers in theatre, from the past, whose careers have been erased from history and memory.

We also have development programs such as JULIA'S READING ROOM where women can have their plays and projects heard by invited members and others, as well as a NETWORKING PROGRAM where women can attend panels and seminars and learn about the work of other women in theatre and meet and network with each other.

EJ: To what extents would you say that the LPTW is successful?

LPTW: We are successful to the extent that our membership is active and creative in pursuing our programs. We are still less successful and getting our LPTW mission known and recognized in the field and in the world.

EJ: What are the issues that the LPTW has more difficulties to tackle? And why are those issues difficult to tackle?

LPTW: Organization recognition is difficult in the US where publicity goes to celebrity events and organizations.

EJ: What are the main sources of support of the LPTW? Do you have state/government support?

LPTW: We are supported by membership dues, grants, and fundraising projects.

EJ: What about the position of the American government as regards the issue of gender gap in the field of theatre?

LPTW: We have never passed an Equal Rights Amendment for women in the US, therefore we do not have specific legislation in this American government to close

the gender gap. This year we have been part of a campaign to achieve gender pay equity. This has become law for NY state.

EJ: In September 2014, LPTW published a study on gender parity off-Broadway. Does the report show any improvements in terms of gender equality?

LPTW: The report shows a general status quo in the percentage of women who have plays published, direct, and design shows off Broadway. Some theaters have included more women in their seasons than others. These theaters have found excellent success and reviews with these plays written and directed by women. Hopefully future League Reports on gender parity will report an increased percentage of plays by women produced off Broadway.

EJ: How does LPTW explain that inequality still subsists in the theatre in the USA?

LPTW: There is gender inequality in all walks of life. Women are able to do theater that they produce and initiate, more easily than become part of the powerful network of theater producers. This is a chronic issue that can only be overcome by becoming a network of one's own in support of women who will bring other women on board for their theatre projects.

EJ: What are the possible solutions the LPTW envisage to improve the situation?

LPTW: We plan to do the programs we are doing with even more publicity and social media coverage.

We are engaging and mentoring younger theater women into our membership as invited guests and apprentice members.

We are supporting government advocacy whenever it arises, and becoming a player in public advocacy whenever we can lend our support.

EJ: The LPTW started off as a national organization whose scope has broadened. Would you say that professional theatre women face the same difficulties throughout the world? Gender gap in the theatrical scene is an international phenomenon?

LPTW: Gender gap is definitely an international phenomenon. This is one reason that we have initiated and accomplished our second triennial Gilder/Coigney International Award.

EJ: The 2014 Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award went to Colombian producer, director, actress, playwright and poet, Patricia Ariza. What does this prize award?

LPTW: This is an award for a woman whose work has improved the lives of women in her country, who will benefit in her country from International Recognition of her work, and whose work is theatrically excellent and exciting. Our Awardee is given a \$ 1,000.00 cash prize, accommodation and airfare to NYC, as well as opportunities to share her work in lectures and performance while residing in NYC.

EJ: Why does the LPTW promote female artists outside the border of the USA?

LPTW: We feel that we can have an impact on the lives of women theater artists abroad in NYC where theater is generally highly thought of and pursued.

We believe that US women artists can have their horizons expanded by knowledge of the different cultural engagement with audiences, and different storytelling techniques and perspectives of various International women artists. For this reason we support workshops, panels and lectures by the prize-winning artist and nominees during the week of the International Award.

EJ: Patricia Ariza's artistic approach is highly political as she has been creating works with women and children victims of conflicts. Apart from its political implication in theatre through the promotion of female artists, does LPTW consider that theatre itself has a political function?

LPTW: LPTW believes that all of its activities are meant to enhance the recognition and awareness of women. As such this is always about empowerment and therefore political.

EJ: What are the other actions conducted by LPTW which encouraged politically challenging productions?

LPTW: We are members of the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce in order to take part in Community activities.

We are hoping to align with other theater organizations that support women in theater.

EJ: Would you define the actions lead by LPTW as political activism?

LPTW: Yes!

ABSTRACTS

Interview with Maxine Kern, co-president of *League of Professional Theatre Women*. The interview was conducted by emails in February 2015.

Entretien avec Maxine Kern, co-présidente de *League of Professional Theatre Women*. L'entretien, réalisé en février 2015, consistait en un échange de courriels.

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Subjects: Theater

Keywords: American Theatre, professional theatre, gender gap, parity, visibility campaigns

Mots-clés: théâtre américain, théâtre professionnel, inégalité homme-femme, parité, valorisation

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